

the other side of the coin by younglegends

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The night Mike Wheeler goes missing, Nancy's late for a not-date with Steve Harrington and can't find her lip gloss anywhere.

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Author's Note:

- For [hyperical](#).

Thank you for your prompt, which honestly changed my world a little bit. Happy Yuletide!

Set during Season 1.

It begins like this:

The night Mike Wheeler goes missing, Nancy's late for a not-date with Steve Harrington and can't find her lip gloss anywhere. She's rummaging through her bag, spilling things everywhere in a fumble and a rush. Her compact, keys, stray bobby pins—there. Tucked into the corner at the very bottom. She twists open the lid, runs the tube over her lips, and catches one last glance in the mirror. A girl stares back at her. Something about her a little unfamiliar. Hair pinned up, eyelashes dark and curled, a flush to her cheeks that she doesn't quite recognize. She tilts her head, considers it. Unsure of what to make of it. Then a pair of headlights cuts through the night outside her window, and she grabs her purse, flies down the stairs.

“Stay out of trouble,” she tells Mike on her way out. Their parents are gone for the evening, but Mike and Nancy have been playing the pretend babysitting game since they were kids. Besides, Steve had caught her by the waist in the school hallway this morning, waggled his eyebrows, and asked her if she'd wanted to catch the new movie with him, and she had said yes with the theatre lights already shining bright in her eyes.

Mike doesn't even look up from the TV. “Have fun on your stupid gross date,” he says.

“It's not a *date*,” Nancy says. There it is again—the strange warmth on her cheeks, foreign on her face.

“Uh-huh,” Mike says. Unimpressed. “Whatever. Have fun on your

not-date.”

“It’s called seeing a movie with friends,” Nancy says, “and if you tell Mom about it, I’ll tell her that you were the one responsible for the short-circuited microwave last week.”

“It was for a science experiment,” Mike yells. He’s pulling a face at her, but Nancy doesn’t see it, because she’s already halfway out the door. Later, she’ll wish she’d looked. She’ll wish she’d said goodbye. But for now she’s already forgotten all about him because Steve Harrington’s hanging out the window of his shiny car in the driveway, honking his horn.

“Steve,” Nancy hisses, face aflame, “stop it, all the neighbors are going to hear—”

Steve raises his eyebrows up at her, grinning, and for a moment Nancy can almost pretend Carol and Tommy aren’t there, making kissy faces at them in the backseat as she opens the passenger door and slides in. It takes her two tries to get her seatbelt buckled, because Steve’s *still* looking at her, face carved sharp by the harsh half-light of the streetlamps around them, leant in impossibly close.

“You look beautiful,” Steve says, and the grin’s gone, replaced by something Nancy hasn’t quite seen on him before—a conviction of belief. Nancy’s throat goes dry, and it isn’t at the words, but at the look on his face. The thrill that she’s the one who’s coaxed it out of him, and into the light.

“Um,” Nancy says. Runs her tongue over her lips, and tastes the sticky sweet of her lip gloss. “Thank you.”

“Can we get this show on the road already?” Carol whines from the backseat, and the smirk is back on Steve’s face like it’d never left. There’s a swooping sensation in Nancy’s chest—anticipation for the night ahead, but also a bit of odd disappointment, like she’s missed something. Then the car’s peeling away in a squeal of tires and a cloud of exhaust, Carol and Tommy’s screeching laughter ringing out the rolled-down windows.

A few minutes later Mike wheels his bicycle out onto the driveway,

squints into the blackness of the night. Climbs up onto his bike and rides away.

Out of the trees, a shadowed, grotesque figure drags itself out onto the street, and waits.

In the morning Nancy still feels half in a dream. Her father is reading the newspaper at the table and her mother is making breakfast in the kitchen like any other day, like Nancy can't feel the weight of Steve's goodnight kiss still lingering on her lips. She brings her fingers up to her mouth as though to touch it.

"Good morning," her mother says. "How was last night?"

"Perfect," Nancy says, and means it.

"That Mike," her mother sighs, "he's going to be late for school—would you go and wake him, Nancy?"

Normally Nancy would complain—he's old enough to get out of bed on his own, thank you very much—but today she's still walking in a dream. She hums to herself all the way back up the stairs and down the hallway.

"Mike," she shouts, banging on his bedroom door. "It's time to get up."

Silence. Nancy rolls her eyes.

"Come on, Mike," she says, banging some more. "Rise and shine."

No response. But even then Nancy's still floating in her dream. It's not until she swings the door open and is faced with nothing but Mike's empty, still-made bed that she begins to wake up, just a little.

"Mike?" she says.

The curtains on the open window flutter slightly, in the crisp October chill.

The story unearths itself in bits and pieces, but it all comes out eventually. All the ugly details, from Nancy's not-date to Mike's little group of friends, who had planned some sort of get-together down at Will Byers' house. At around half past nine o'clock Will had waved goodbye to the three of them speeding off down the street on their bicycles. That was the last time anyone had seen Mike Wheeler.

Jim Hopper rubs a hand over his face. Surveys the road Mike was supposed to take on his way home, the trees that surround him in silence. The thought *grave markers* flashes unbidden across his mind, and he buries it down. This is Hawkins. Hawkins, Indiana, where police calls are made for garden gnome thieves and aggressive owls; where nothing ever veers off the path of the ordinary.

Nothing but Mike Wheeler and his bike glinting in the afternoon sun, lying abandoned like a dead thing on the side of the road.

This isn't right, Jim thinks, this isn't how it's supposed to go, and with a sick twist of his stomach remembers a flash of hospital lights, the steady flatline of the heart monitor.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen of a local diner, a girl with a shaved head and hunger gnawing at her belly spots a carton of fries left out on the counter, still fresh and hot from the oven.

Nancy sits at the kitchen table, listening to her mother's muffled crying from the other room, and stares at the spot Mike should have been sitting in that morning, talking with his mouth open and spraying food everywhere. It doesn't make any sense, she thinks. She must have been right—she's in a dream, and she'll wake up any moment now. Any moment now. Now.

The phone rings, and Nancy picks it up without thinking. "Wheeler residence," she says on autopilot.

There's nothing but odd static. A faint rustling sound.

"Hello?" she says.

The scratchy rustling sound intensifies. Almost like... Nancy grips the phone tighter to her ear. *Breathing.*

"Who's there?" she says. Her voice trembles. She hesitates, because she doesn't dare to say it—the name on her lips.

On the other end, Nancy swears she can almost make out a garbled voice. As though someone is talking a mile a minute, but from under the surface of a pool, and she can't make out the words—only the air bubbles, the spaces where sound should be.

Her mother appears suddenly in the doorway, hair wild, eyes red. "Who is it?" she says, clutching Holly in her arms. "Is it Mike?"

As though summoned by the name, the phone bursts in a crackle of static. Nancy yelps, dropping the receiver. It clatters to the ground, bobbing uselessly on its cord. Her fingers are burned an angry red. Holly starts to cry.

"Mike," her mother whispers, like an echo.

Over their heads, the light flickers, goes out.

Mike is running. He's been running for so long he doesn't know if he remembers how to stop. Sometimes he turns it into a game—Will and Lucas and Dustin are chasing him in hide-and-go-seek, which he hasn't played in years because it's for babies but he still remembers the rules: keep quiet, find your way back to home base, and whatever you do, don't get caught.

And then sometimes the great lumbering thing steps out of the shadows and then the game's over and Mike's thoughts clear of anything but his pulse jackrabbiting in his throat and the ground thudding under his feet. His chest seizes and his legs ache and it hurts to breathe, but he's got to be quick, which he's good at, and he's got to be quiet, which he's not. *Shut up, Mike*, he hears in his ears as the wind rushes past him, carrying ash and dust and strange white spores that glow ghostly white in the dark, and they're the voices of his friends, his sister, the bully at school all mixed into one, whispering to him over and over *shut up shut up for once in your life, Mike, just shut up*.

If you ever get lost, his mother'd told him once, stay in one spot, but he's never been good at listening to his mother, has he? Maybe that's why no one's found him yet. But now that he's started running he can't stop, because none of the houses look quite right and he's got to get home, back to his mom and his dad and Nancy being annoying at the kitchen table and there'll be pie for dessert, if he's quick, if he's quiet, if he's good.

In the distance something howls, and Mike runs just a little bit faster.

"I'm just saying," Dustin shouts over the pouring rain, as they pick their way through the sodden undergrowth of the forest. "This

doesn't really seem like a good idea."

"Yeah, well, keep it to yourself," Lucas shouts back, "because it's really not helpful right now."

"Seriously!" Dustin says. He splutters rainwater from his mouth. "I can't see anything in this rain, and we're all alone in the same place Mike went missing, and most of all, *we don't have any weapons!*"

"You don't have to stay," Will says. He keeps his voice steady, but his fingers are trembling around his flashlight, and his teeth won't stop chattering. "It was my idea. You guys can go home, if you want."

"Whoa, whoa," Lucas says. "And leave you here alone? What are you, crazy? He's our best friend, too!"

"You don't—" Will stops and turns to face them. He's drenched, and the rain is seeping everywhere, in his hair and shoes and clothes, turning every part of him cold. "You don't have to stay. It's my fault he's gone. If we'd just gone to his house that night, if we'd had our campaign that night like he wanted to, he'd never have been out on Mirkwood—"

"Are you stupid?" Lucas says. "It's not your fault. If anything it's *my* fault, I was racing him back home and I didn't check to see if he was still following or not 'cause I thought I'd finally beat him for once—"

"It's all my fault!" Dustin wails.

"How on earth is it *your* fault?" Lucas says, turning on him.

"If I hadn't fought him for the leftover pizza then we'd all have left earlier and maybe that would have changed everything!"

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"Did you hear that?" Will says, sharply, and they all fall silent. The rain thunders down from above. Their three flashlight beams cut through the trees and converge to land on the face of a shivering girl, hands raised against the light.

After everything Nancy still can't believe she has to go to school. The teachers smile at her kindly when they call her name for attendance, like they're afraid she'll break, and her classmates stare and whisper in plain sight, like she's not even there. Barb shoots glares at everyone they pass by in the hallways, but Nancy doesn't really care. Just grips her books tight in her arms and walks on, eyes set straight ahead, seeing nothing.

Someone taps on her shoulder, and Nancy startles. But it's only Steve. She feels like she hasn't seen him in so long—but their not-date was just two days ago. Two days ago she would have blushed furiously at his casual touch, worn the weight like a bruise. Something deep inside aches to remember what it had felt like, to burn so easily. But now she can't feel anything but cold. She shivers.

"Hey, Nancy," Steve says. His eyes are soft. For some reason Nancy finds herself thinking of the look he'd given her in the car, that night, and wonders with nails dug into her palms what on earth it would take to get it back. "How are you doing?"

Nancy doesn't know what to say, so she says nothing.

"Listen," Steve says. "I'm so sorry about what's happened, about—" He bites his lip. *Say it*, Nancy thinks with a sudden viciousness. *Say it*. He doesn't. "I want you to know, I'm here for you, but also—I've got an idea that I think might cheer you up a little."

Nancy stares up at him. Blinks. "Cheer me up," she repeats.

Steve shifts from foot to foot. His knee is jiggling. It strikes Nancy that Steve Harrington is nervous. About *her*. As if the world couldn't have been turned more upside down. "Yeah," Steve says. "Something to take your mind off things for a bit. Just one night. See, my parents are going out of town this weekend, and we'll have the whole house to ourselves. We've got a pool. It'll be fun—you can invite Barb, anyone you want, and you can just relax. Take it easy."

His voice is smooth, sweet, and she can't look at him without seeing the bright lights of the cinema, the flush of her face in the mirror. The curtains fluttering in the wind. All of it just pretending.

"I can't," she says.

"Nancy," Steve says. Gentle, as though soothing a spooked animal. "Hey—Nancy. Are you alright?"

"I can't," Nancy repeats, and then, "*my brother* is missing." It's the first time she's said the words out loud. They sound like they belong to someone else—someone on the evening news; a character in a movie. And now, being the one to say them feels like she's cast the curse and made it come true. She says it again, because she figures she'll have to get used to it, to owning them. The words on her tongue; the weight of them in her mouth. "My brother is missing."

"Nancy," Steve tries. "I'm sorry—the police are searching, you know, the whole town's searching, I'm sure they'll find him soon, but you can't beat yourself up over this—"

"I have to go," Nancy says, and flees.

But she has nowhere to go but a house left utterly still save for the lights that flicker on and off as though they, too, are on their way out for good. Her mother paces the room and carries Holly with her everywhere like she's afraid she'll lose her if she puts her down. "Shh," she soothes, rocking her back and forth in her arms. "Shh. My baby."

Her father is standing by the telephone, looking bemused. "We keep getting these prank calls," he says, when Nancy enters the kitchen. And, squinting up at the lights, "I think I'll have to call an electrician to deal with this."

Nancy stares at him. Less than forty-eight hours ago Mike was

standing right here, running his mouth about some fantasy game campaign he was planning out. What was it he liked to call himself? Dungeon Master, ruler of fates. If she just closes her eyes she can still feel him there. She doesn't close her eyes. She goes up the stairs and into her room, but on the way she has to pass by Mike's, the perfectly made bed and the open window—

She can't stay here. She doesn't know where this is, but it isn't home.

Nancy thinks about Mike's bicycle, tires spinning in the dead leaves and grass, and she goes out to the garage and digs out an old baseball bat.

"Hey, Jonathan," Will says, after dinner. In that too-casual way of his when he wants something. "Can I borrow your camera?"

Jonathan blinks at him, standing in the doorway of his bedroom. "What for?"

Will's gaze slides to the floor. "We thought we could take it out to the forest," he says. "Lucas and Dustin and I. We'd, y'know, take a look around." He's being deliberately vague, but Jonathan can connect the dots easily enough. He sighs, gets up and slings an arm around Will's shoulders, brings him close.

"Listen," Jonathan says. "It's really terrible what's happened to Mike, but you can't go off by yourselves searching for him. There's a curfew, remember?"

Will sets his jaw stubbornly. "What's happened?" he says.

"What?"

"You said, it's really terrible what's happened to Mike. What's happened to him?"

Jonathan hesitates. “Nothing,” he says. “That’s the point—we don’t know what’s happened to him. And until we know, the last thing I want is for you to go missing, too. You gotta stay safe, you hear me? You can’t do that to me, Will—you can’t do that to Mom.”

Will visibly deflates at the mention of Mom, slumping forward. “He was at our house that night,” he says. “I shouldn’t have let him come—I should have let him stay—Jonathan, it’s *Mike*,” and his voice cracks on the name.

“We’ll find him, Will,” Jonathan says firmly, and ignores the hollow echo where his conviction should be. “We’ll find him, but it’s not on you, do you hear me? It’s not on you to put yourself in danger and go after him.”

Will nods, and Jonathan ruffles his hair, holds onto him a little longer. He doesn’t really know why. It must be all this with Mike’s disappearance—the kid he’s watched grow up alongside his brother rode off into the woods like he must have done a thousand times, only this time he never came back out. It could have just as easily been Will. It could *still be* Will.

And maybe it’s because he’s holding on so long, that he misses the hard, determined glint of Will’s eye.

After Will leaves, though, Jonathan eyes the camera on his desk thoughtfully. The whole town is out searching for Mike Wheeler, concerned parents and teachers and do-gooder neighbors; there isn’t a telephone pole that isn’t plastered with posters of his missing face. Jonathan has a string of photographs on his camera film waiting to be developed—stark shots of the sky, the metallic shell of an insect cradled in his palm, strangers’ faces caught in laughter, boredom, thought. He thinks he can do better.

He takes his camera, a flashlight, his bag. Checks on Will—safely in his room, doing homework—before quietly slipping out of the door.

It's not until Nancy's neck-deep into the forest that she thinks, just maybe, she should've told Barb where she was going. She hadn't, because she'd known Barb would have talked her out of it, sweet sensible Barb who would've talked her down from her panic on the phone and kept going until she fell asleep, safe at home in her own bed. Would've never let her get out of the house with a flashlight and a baseball bat into the woods. So of course Nancy hadn't told her, and now the wind is biting into her knuckles and the handle of the bat is leaving indents in the skin of her palms and she's got nothing to show for it but the cuts and the scrapes from low-hanging branches in her face.

"Mike?" Nancy calls. She hates the way her voice sounds, feeble and weak in the stillness of the night. She clears her throat. "Mike, if you can hear me—it's me, Nancy!"

She shines her flashlight into the darkness, and catches a flash of *something* in the distance—

"Oh my god," she says, *ohmygodohmygodohmygod* and she's stumbling backward, feet somehow finding purchase on the ground and she's running, running fast and frantic and straight into something solid that knocks the wind right out of her.

"Hey!" There are hands clutching at her, holding her still. Her flashlight beam jerks wildly before landing on the face of none other than Jonathan Byers, eyes wide and startled, a camera hanging around his neck. "Are you alright?"

"Jesus," Nancy says, heaving gasps for air. Whatever she'd come across is nowhere to be seen, now, and she struggles to get her heart rate back down. "What—what are *you* doing here?"

"I was—" Jonathan swallows. "I thought I'd help. You know, with the search efforts."

Now that Nancy's pulse has slowed she can recognize there's no threat, not anymore. Just Jonathan Byers and his camera and his hands steadying her, still. He seems to realize this last fact the same

time she does, and they quickly spring apart. They hover around each other for an awkward moment, the space of several degrees of separation between them, not quite close enough to say they really know each other, not quite far enough to be strangers. Missed connections. *We're in the same grade. Your brother is my brother's best friend. We always come by to give your mother a casserole every Christmas, and you're the one who opens the door.* The list ends there, but at the same time, it feels like it should all add up to something.

"Thank you," is what Nancy comes up with. A pause. "Have you found anything?"

Jonathan hesitates. "I don't think so," he says. And then: "Have you?"

She could keep it like this. End it here, as they've always done. A brief glance in the school hallways, a nod of acknowledgment when picking up their brother. This is the usual equilibrium of things. But the world's been turned on its head, and Nancy's done pretending otherwise.

"I think I saw something," Nancy admits. Once again, saying it out loud seems to make it real. Only this time, the weight is a relief. Something tangible to hold onto, and not let go. An admission of truth—or an answer.

There's a moment of silence. The weight is in the air, tilting the world on its axis. It's up to Jonathan to catch it, or let it fall.

He shifts, slightly, across from her. Says, quietly: "What did you see?"

Nancy swallows. "I—I'm not sure," she says. "It didn't look right. I might have imagined it."

He's watching her, closely. Their eyes adjusting to the pitch blackness of the night, Nancy's wavering flashlight occasionally lighting up some fragment of the whole—a nearby tree trunk, a dead leaf underfoot, the bone-white flash of his wrist. "Do you think you did?" he says.

Nancy's flashlight catches him on the chin, his sloping nose, his eyes, and it's the steadiness she finds there that strengthens her resolve,

straightens her spine. “No,” she says, gripping her flashlight tighter. “No, I don’t. I think I saw something, something almost human-like... but it wasn’t. It was wrong. And I think... I think it didn’t have a face.”

She keeps the flashlight on his eyes. He doesn’t blink.

“Okay,” he says, and then, carefully, “is that why you have a baseball bat?”

Nancy tightens her grip on it. Sticks out her chin. “You don’t have to believe me, but I know what I saw—”

“No, no, I just mean—” Jonathan sighs. “You saw *something*, I’m sure, and it’s late at night, and it isn’t safe. I think we should get you out of here—”

“You’re out here, aren’t you?” Nancy says, sharp, and he falls silent.

“Jonathan,” she says, after a moment. “He’s my *brother*.”

When he looks at her then, she can see it. Clear and solid understanding dawning upon his face, perhaps for the first time that night.

“All right,” he says, with a swallow. “All right. So, uh. You wanna show me this thing you saw?”

“I’m not too sure,” Nancy begins, and that’s when the beam of her flashlight falls on a shifting shape on the ground, and she jumps back, heart flying into her throat. “*Jesus!*”

“Shit,” Jonathan says. Their flashlight beams fumble to find each other in the dark, and he squints closer into the shadows. “Is that... a dead *deer*?”

Steve Harrington has been having a very strange day.

Nancy hadn't wanted to come to his party, so he'd called it off entirely, despite Carol and Tommy's outspoken disbelief. Of course she didn't want to come to his party—her *brother's* missing. It was stupid of him to suggest it. But looking at her, face pale and eyes bleak, he had wanted nothing more than to make her smile again. It had once been so easy. But maybe that had been stupid too—thinking he could keep this. Thinking that he wouldn't ruin this, too.

"You can't be for real," Tommy had said when Steve'd refused to let him in the house. "We planned this for weeks, dude."

"And for what," Carol said. "That goody-two-shoes? She was never gonna come anyway—she thinks she's too *good* for all this."

"She is," Steve had said, and slammed the door on their incredulous faces. But the wheels had started turning in his head, and wouldn't stop, until he found himself driving out to Nancy's house, an apology ready on his lips. Because Nancy's good, too good for this—but maybe, just maybe, Steve can be better, too. Steve can be better, for her.

He hauls himself up to the roof, wet tiles and dead leaves digging into his palms, and peers into the window, an easy grin already on his face.

When Nancy emerges from the shower Jonathan is in the middle of laying an old blanket out on the floor. They both freeze when they see each other, like they've been caught.

"Sorry," Jonathan's saying, "I just figured—"

He's turning away, and Nancy's heart seizes in her throat. "No," she says, and he stops. "I don't want to be alone tonight, no."

If Steve were there—but no. Not Steve, not his stupid perfect face beaming at her, open as the moon. She'd never be able to explain herself to him. He'd never understand.

So it's Jonathan here with her instead, here in the muted pink glow of her bedroom like she hadn't crawled her way out of some godforsaken frozen hell in the forest, like she hadn't seen a *monster*, like she isn't shivering like she'll never be warm again.

That's when the lights go out. And then back on again, leaving Nancy and Jonathan blinking at each other.

"It's been doing a lot lately," Nancy says, "ever since..."

Her voice dies out.

"Nancy?" Jonathan says.

"Mike," Nancy says slowly.

The lights flash again, frantic. Nancy jumps to her feet, but is unsure of where, exactly, to go.

"Mike," she says. "Is that you? Can you hear me?"

"Nancy, what—" Jonathan says, but the lights are blinking furiously now, through her room and out the hallway, down into Mike's room and back again, and Nancy can almost see him pacing back and forth, trying to get her to see, come on, Nancy, can't you *see*—

She reaches out, hesitantly, and places a hand on the wall. There's a moment when all the lights come on, all at once. And then she swears, under her palm, she feels the wall ripple and move. Just slightly. Just enough for a quick touch of five small fingers, pressed against her own.

"Mike," Nancy half-breathes, half-laughs, and then the touch is gone, and the lights go out, and don't come back on.

After a moment of standing in the darkness, Jonathan reaches out for her. "Nancy?" he says, sounding uncertain. "What—what was that?"

“Don’t you see? Mike’s *here*,” Nancy says, triumphant. Still trembling, but not from cold anymore—from wonder. “He’s alive—he isn’t lost—Mike’s been *here* all this time!”

And that’s when, from outside the window, the first wails of sirens burst through the night.

“He’s dead!” Lucas shouts. “Why would you do that? Why would you say he’s not dead?”

“Stop it,” Will says. His hands are shaking. It’s getting too cold, in Castle Byers, but he doesn’t know where else Eleven can stay. Maybe he’ll bring some more blankets from the house tomorrow and hope his mom doesn’t notice. “Stop—stop it.”

Lucas turns on him, eyes red-rimmed. “She told us he was still alive!” he says. His voice sounds ragged. Will’s never heard him like this before, not ever. “How could she *do* something like that?”

Eleven watches them, wide-eyed, sitting cross-legged on the floor. She’s huddled in an old parka Will’d dug out of his mom’s closet and her mouth is twisted down. In her hands, she fiddles with Will’s walkie-talkie, scratches of static leaking from it like runoff.

“El,” Will says. His lips feel numb. The cold. It hurts. “Why did you tell us Mike’s alive?”

She stares up at him, as though beseeching him to understand something. But he doesn’t understand. He doesn’t understand how a few days ago Mike was in his house jumping at the scary parts of movies and now he’s something the police pulled out of the river. He doesn’t understand how Mike’s never gonna show up to class or come round to his house or even pull off the campaign he’d been planning for months. He doesn’t understand how Mike can be gone.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” Lucas says, and in Eleven’s hands,

a burst of feedback coalesces into a voice.

“So you’re in the Vale of Shadows,” the voice says, tangled with static. Barely more than a whisper. “You’re trying to get home. But you’re lost, in this strange place that looks like home, but isn’t real. It’s dark, and cold, and wrong. You have the option to stay in the neighborhood, or try to hide out in the woods. What do you do?”

All three of them stare, wide-eyed, as a drop of bright blood trickles down from Eleven’s nose.

“Mike,” she says, the way one would point out a bird in the sky.

“The neighborhood’s empty,” the voice continues. “The lights don’t work and there’s no one around, and I don’t like it. But the woods—the woods are where I saw—” Static overflows the speaker in a burst of feedback, and then Dustin’s jumping forward, grabbing the walkie-talkie.

“He’s the DM,” Dustin says. “He hasn’t got any players! He hasn’t got a team!” He cups his hands around his mouth and hollers into the walkie-talkie. “Mike! You can’t play by yourself! The game doesn’t work that way!”

“Shut up,” Lucas says, “that’s not important—the important thing is that it’s *Mike*, he’s alive—” He elbows Dustin out of the way, snatches away the walkie-talkie. “Mike, do you copy? Are you there? Where are you? Over.”

“Mike, we’re looking for you!” Dustin shouts. “They said you were dead, but we’re still looking for you, and we’re not gonna stop! Over.”

“Mike,” Will says. “Where are you? Why can’t you come home?”

A rumble of static. A hiss of connection. “The monster,” Mike’s voice says, and then the sound of running, and nothing.

Jonathan's bent over the trunk of his car, rummaging through something. The line of Nancy's mouth is terse, but she leans down, says something that gets lost in the wind, between them, and Jonathan looks up at her. Steve turns the street corner and sees them together, and the flash of white lightning hurt that strikes him is so bright, it's blinding.

He's there before he even registers that he's moved, yanking them apart, fists coming up to clench in the collar of Jonathan's jacket, and then just as quickly letting go. It's not Jonathan he's here for, so he sends him stumbling off the sidewalk. Turns instead to Nancy, staring at Steve like *he's* crazy, like he's the wrong one out in this picture.

"Steve?" Nancy says, the wind whipping her hair into her face. "What are you doing—what is *wrong* with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" Steve says. "What's wrong with *you*? I was actually worried for you, do you know that? God—I can't believe it. I was actually *worried* for you. I thought you were—I wanted to—" He swallows. "I wanted to be there for you," he says.

"What are you talking about," Nancy says, "Steve," and her hand comes up to clutch at his sleeve, but he shakes it off. "Steve—hey." Her eyes narrow. "Did you come by last night? Is that what this is about?"

His laughter hurts in his throat. "Yeah," he says, "so what if I did, so what if I wanted to see you—"

"Steve, it wasn't like that," she's saying, but Steve's caught up in staring at her, in thinking *how did I not see—that you were just like everyone else*. "We were just—"

"Just what?" Steve says, quietly. He takes a step forward, into her space, so she has to jerk her head up to look him in the eye. "Finish that sentence. Go on. Finish it."

And then there's a moment, in the rush of wind between them, that feels like she really will. Suddenly Steve feels like he's stumbled upon

something he shouldn't have, a flash of a fall in her eyes like a precipice. Looming before them. But if they were to turn back, now—they'll never find their way to it again.

Except then Jonathan is stepping up, hand coming down on Steve's shoulder. "Hey," he says, "back off, there are more important things than this right now—"

Steve whirls around and shoves him away. "Stay out of this," he shouts, "don't ever touch me again, don't ever touch *her*—"

"Hey!" Nancy's grabbing at his arms, dragging him back. "What are you *doing*? Stop it—you don't even know what you're talking about —"

"Oh, don't I?" Steve says, and when he looks at them he doesn't see them as they are now, staring at him like he's lost his mind, but as they were a minute ago, standing over the trunk of the car and sharing a smile like a secret, and everyone walking past them on the street like they were the most normal sight in the world. "It looks perfectly clear to me. Of course you—" he jerks his head at Jonathan — "can't get any game on your own, so you waited for an opportunity, didn't you? An opening? And then the perfect chance *did* come along, her poor baby brother got lost in the woods and then you could come in, be a shoulder to cry on, pat yourself on the back for being such a *hero* when you can't be the proper man of your own household—"

It's the last thing that Steve expects, but it's probably what's been coming to him for a long time: another round of hurt. The fist comes flying at him out of nowhere, and the next thing Steve sees is stars. Who knew—Jonathan Byers packs a punch.

"Shut up," Jonathan says, between ragged breaths. "Shut up. You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know *anything*."

But if there's one thing Steve Harrington is good at, it's following a bad idea to the end. "Hit a nerve, did I?" he says through bared teeth, and rears back to catch Jonathan straight in the chin. Jonathan's head whips back, and then they're on each other like boys in the schoolyard, kicking and punching and scratching. Digging deep to

hurt anywhere they can reach.

“Hey!”

And then Nancy is between them, dragging them back by the collars of their shirts. “No,” she says, “you don’t get to do this, not *now*, get *up*, stop it.”

Her hair is running wild in the wind, her teeth clenched. Jonathan and Steve stare at her, and then at each other. They stop it.

“Don’t you ever speak about my brother like that ever again,” Nancy says, gaze levelled straight at Steve. There is a hardness in her eyes that stops all the breath in his throat. He’d be lying if he said he’s never seen it before, because she always used to look at him like that, back when he’d first noticed her. Of course he *knew* her—it was impossible not to know anyone, in a town like this. But that morning he’d been slouching in the back of class with his legs sprawled out before him under his desk, idly twirling a pencil with his thumb, when the sun had fallen just so through the windows and come to alight on the hair of Nancy Wheeler sitting in the second row. Everything after that was history. And when he’d been beginning to flirt with her, trying to catch her attention, that was when Nancy would size him up as though searching for the trick, the flaw. It had scared him a little, back then, but it had also thrilled him. Later when she finally softened Steve had to wonder if it was because he’d come up clean in her search, or if she had just found exactly what she’d expected.

Now, Steve doesn’t have to wonder. His mouth is bleeding. He swallows the shame of it down.

“I just wanted to be there for you,” Steve repeats helplessly.

“So *do it*, then,” Jonathan snarls, and Steve snaps his gaze to him, startled. He’d almost forgotten he’s still there, under him, head thrown back against the gravel, fist still raised. “For god’s sake.”

There is a level here, Steve realizes, that he isn’t on. Can’t quite reach. Something he isn’t seeing. Flashes of fear in their eyes, in every glance between the two of them. Steve looks back and forth at

them, trying to figure it out.

“What happened,” Steve says, slowly.

The tension between the three of them is brittle, as though just one more push will shatter it. One more word. They stare at each other, caught in a dare, waiting each other out. Waiting for the first one to fall.

And then they’re getting pulled apart from each other, arms dragging Steve off Jonathan and away. Too late he registers the sound of sirens through the air.

It must be that he’s getting used to them, by now.

“Because she’s a *traitor*,” Lucas shouts, pointing straight at Eleven, standing there in the scrapyard with the hood of her puffy parka tugged low over her shaven head, dwarfed in Will’s mom’s old woolen pants pinned up at the ankles and a pair of Dustin’s old ratty sneakers. Fresh blood on her sleeve. “She lied to us! She’s just messing everything up, while Mike’s dying out there in the Upside Down!”

“Calm down, man,” Dustin’s saying, and Lucas shoves him off.

“She’s been lying to us from the beginning!” Lucas says. “And you’re all too blind to see it!”

“Wait,” Will says, “Lucas, please,” and something in his voice makes Lucas stop, because he recognizes it. A fear running so deep Lucas can feel it in his bones. “If she doesn’t want us to find him—there must be a reason.” He turns to Eleven, now. “There must be a reason, right?”

Eleven stands there shaking. “It’s,” she tries. “It’s—it’s not safe.”

"I knew it," Lucas spits out, "she *lied* to us," but Will's taking a step toward her, careful.

"Why, El?" Will says. Eyes trained on her face. "Why isn't it safe?"

A tear falls crooked over her cheek. "I," she whispers, and falters, and that's it, Lucas has had *enough*.

"We're wasting so much time, when Mike's *out there*, waiting for us," Lucas says, "waiting for us to *find* him, and *she's* the one who's been wasting our time! Maybe this is all her fault, you know, maybe she's the one who caused it—maybe *she's* the monster—"

That's when he spots them. Troy and James, stalking towards them, something clenched in Troy's fist. The sharp glint of a knife blade.

"Oh, shit," Lucas says.

Dustin, as always, puts it best. "Run!" he bellows, and they're all off, tearing through the scrapyard for the woods, except Dustin's getting a cramp and Eleven's shoes are too big for her and Mike's always been the fastest out of all of them, and he's not here now—

Lucas stumbles over a pebble and *oh, shit*, that's it, someone's got their hand hooked in the hood of his jacket and then an arm's coming around to squeeze him by the neck, knife point digging into his chin, Troy's disgusting breath in his ear.

"Stop or I'll cut him," Troy bellows, and everyone freezes.

Lucas' pulse is thudding so hard against the blade he thinks it's gonna cut itself open. God, if Mike were here he'd know what to do—If Mike were here this wouldn't be happening in the first place—

"Let him go!" Will's shouting, and Dustin's picked up a stick, and all Lucas can think is please, *please* don't let Mike be dead—

And then Eleven is there, stalking towards them with a glare hard enough to hurt, hood fallen down and blood trickling from her nose. She pins her gaze on James, who's thrown backward and lands with a muffled grunt, and then jerks her head sideways at Troy, who screams straight in Lucas' ear at the sickening crunch of his arm,

knife dropping from his hand onto the ground.

“Go,” Eleven says, and they go.

Leaving Lucas standing there, the skin of his neck smarting from phantom pain, the knife scattered among the dead leaves at his feet. He stares at her, stark against the clear white autumn sky, the strongest vision he’s ever seen, and watches as her face crumples, eyes filling with tears.

“It’s not safe,” she says, “because I’m the monster. You’re right. I opened the gate.”

Oh, shit, Lucas thinks, again. Only this time he steps up to Eleven, takes her sleeve by the hand.

“No,” he says, “I was wrong,” and he can’t quite keep the wonder out of his voice. “El—you *saved* me.”

She stares at him, nose bloodied, and he has to make her realize, make her believe what he now knows.

“You saved me,” he repeats. “I’m sorry—I’m sorry. You saved me.”

“You saved us,” Will repeats, coming up beside them.

Dustin, as always, puts it best: throws his arms around them all in a hug.

“We’ll find Mike,” Lucas says, muffled by Dustin’s sleeve, Will’s hair, El’s puffy hood. “We’ll do it.”

Only when they get back to Castle Byers, it’s to find Joyce Byers standing there, staring at them.

“Oh, shit,” Lucas says. One last time, for luck.

“Where have you been?” Joyce says, “I’ve been looking for you everywhere, Will, don’t you know it’s not safe out here, not anymore —”

“I can explain,” Will says quickly.

Lucas can see the moment Joyce sees Eleven. Her visible double take. "Are those—my clothes?"

Eleven shrinks back, behind Dustin. Will steps forward.

"Mom," he says, "please, this is important—we're finding Mike, he isn't dead, we heard his voice—Mom, please, you have to believe me."

Joyce looks at him.

"I believe you," she says.

Jonathan sits between Steve Harrington, left eye bruised and bloody, and Nancy Wheeler, biting on her bottom lip, across from a box of guns, bullets, traps, and cans of lighter fluid. On the other side of the desk, Chief Jim Hopper stares back.

"You wanna tell me what all this is about?" Hopper says, and Jonathan's gaze skates down to the floor.

"You won't believe it," he mutters.

Hopper plants a palm on the table, leans over into his space until Jonathan's forced to look him back in the eye. "Try me," he says.

It's Nancy who comes out with it. "Mike isn't dead," she says. "I don't know whose body you found, but it isn't my brother, because I can still hear him, in my house, but it's like—like he's on the other side of it, or something, and he can't get back through. There was this monster, in the woods—Jonathan and I saw it, and I found where it lives, and I think Mike's there, too."

Silence.

"Wait, what?" says Steve. Straightening up from where he's slumped

in his chair, pressing a bag of ice to his face.

Jonathan holds his head in his hands. “Can you make him go?” he asks Hopper.

“Wait, no, no, I’m not leaving,” Steve says, “not until you explain what the fuck you’re talking about,” and Jonathan rolls his eyes up to the heavens.

“So, what,” Hopper says, “you were just gonna go and fight this monster with guns and lighter fluid? A bunch of scrawny stupid teens? That what your plan was?”

“Hey,” Jonathan bristles, except—except if *that’s* the part of this explanation that he’s caught up on, then doesn’t that mean—

There’s a commotion from outside Hopper’s office. A woman’s voice. Jonathan recognizes it at once, and he’s up and out of the chair. “Hey, hey, hey,” Hopper’s saying, but Jonathan’s already out the door, staring at his mom in the station, surrounded by a group of kids, one of whom is—

“Will?” Jonathan says. “Mom? What are you doing here? What’s happened?”

They blink back at him. “Jonathan?” his mom says. “What—oh god no, has something happened to you, too—”

“No no no, Mom, I’m fine,” Jonathan says, but she’s already spotted his bruised knuckles, the swell of his lip. And then Hopper’s there, at his back, Nancy and Steve hovering like they’re not sure what they’ve stumbled upon, but before any of them can speak, it’s *Will* who’s shoving his way to the front, grabbing Jonathan’s arm.

“You said!” Will bursts out. Everyone falls into stunned silence. He looks like he’s going to cry. “You said to stay safe, for *Mom*, but you’re out here too—”

“Will, I’m sorry,” Jonathan says, stricken.

A pause.

"Looks like neither of us is particularly good at following my own advice," Jonathan says wryly.

Will's still staring at him with huge eyes, but there's a bit of a smile tugging at his mouth, now. "Looks like it," he says, voice small.

"Can someone tell me," Hopper says from behind them, rubbing at his temples, "what in the hell is going on? And why there is an entire classroom in the police station?"

"You're going to want to hear this," Joyce says, and from the other side of the station comes a shrill shout.

"That's her!" Troy says, pointing straight at the girl peeking out from behind Joyce. "She's the one who—who can *do* things! Who hurt me! She's the monster!"

Nancy and Jonathan share a quick glance. Steve catches it and mouths *what?* They both ignore him.

The girl flinches like she's been hit. But already Will is squaring his shoulders, Lucas and Dustin stepping forward to join him.

"You take that back," Lucas says, and then, turning to face Hopper, "She's going to help us find Mike."

Nancy's mouth opens in an *o* of astonishment.

"I told you," she says, to no one in particular, to everyone. Voice breaking under the relief of it. "I told you."

"Yes," Hopper says grimly. "You're going to want to tell me. All of you need to tell me everything, right now."

"I'm going to be with you the whole time," Joyce Byers had said, "and if it ever gets too scary, you just let me know. Okay?"

It's the sound of her voice Eleven holds on to now, stranded in the nothingness around her. That and the awe in Lucas' eyes, the gentle reassuring touch of Will's hand, the toothy grin on Dustin's face. The strength of their belief: that she saved them, and she can save them still. She can go into the dark and bring back what's been lost.

She doesn't know very much about Mike, though Will and Lucas and Dustin talk about him all the time. They say he likes the same things they do, and he's funny, and he's smart, and he's brave. He's a friend, too. She doesn't know what he looks like, only knows the sound of his voice, but when she finds him she recognizes him at once. Huddled in the basement of the upside down of his house, all alone.

"Mike?" she whispers, and he peers at her, face sunken, skin pale.

"Who are you?" he says. "Did it—Did it get you, too?"

She shivers. "No," she says. "I'm here, for you. To find you. I'm—I'm a friend."

"Oh," he says. "Is my mom there? My dad?"

Eleven hesitates. "There's Will," she says, and his eyes light up, just a little. "Lucas, Dustin. Nancy."

"Nancy?" he says, and it's almost a laugh. "Nancy's there? Oh, man."

"They're coming for you," Eleven says. "Just wait. A little bit more."

"Okay," he says, teeth chattering. "That's all I'm doing, now. I tried running, and then I got scared so I tried talking, to pretend I wasn't really there, and then I got tired, so now I'm just here. Hiding. I'm not very good at it, though."

"We're coming," Eleven says again, for lack of anything else.

"Okay," Mike says again, and then, "can you stay with me for a little bit?"

She tries. She really does. Sits down next to him and takes his hand. It's cold.

“Hey,” Mike says, “can you tell my mom—” He shivers. “Can you tell my mom it was me who short-circuited the microwave? And I’m sorry?”

She doesn’t know what he means, and by the time she comes up with the words to ask, he’s gone.

Nancy stares unseeing at the floor of the gym. She’s sitting against the wall with Jonathan on one side and Steve on the other. All of them are silent, Jonathan because he looks like he’s unsure of what to say, Steve because he still looks like he’s just had his whole world cave in on itself.

“I want to kill it,” Nancy says, bitingly clear.

“Okay,” Jonathan says.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Steve says. “Hold on a minute. What?”

“You can stay out of it,” Jonathan says. “Just go home. This has nothing to do with you anyway.”

“Like hell!” Steve says. “You two are gonna get yourselves killed!”

Nancy turns to pin him down with her stare. “No,” she says. “It’s Jonathan’s mom and Hopper who’re gonna die if the Demogorgon gets them. And then my brother. And then all of us.” She clenches a fist on her knee. “So we’re going to kill it first.”

Steve stares back at her, and a part of her mourns him, because it knows he’s never going to get it. He’s just too far from it all. Except then—there, the flicker in his eyes. Hardening into a side of him she’d thought she’d never see again. Joining them in perfect understanding.

“Okay,” he says. “I’m with you.” A pause. “I think.”

"Don't ruin it," Jonathan snorts.

They've got the skeleton of a plan, but they still need a place. "My house," Jonathan says, "there's no one there anyway, we'll lure it there," but Steve shakes his head.

"My place," he says. "My parents aren't home." He cracks a smile still bloodied, and something in Nancy's heart leaps to see it, at last. "And we've got a pool."

They set up in his backyard, by the mouth of the woods. All the traps are laid and set. Nancy loads the pistol in her hand, and looks up to see Steve watching her, mouth slack.

"What," she says.

He stares at her like it's the first time he's ever seen her. But the look is not reserved for her alone—not anymore. She catches him eyeing Jonathan nervously, from where he's hammering nails into the baseball bat. All three of them dressed up for war in his sprawling backyard. It's so far wrong, it's flipped over to the side of right again. Nancy's armed with guns, a knife, matches, but it's the knowledge that this is what they're capable of that steels the last of her resolve. She watches Steve's shell-shocked face, and wonders if he still believes her beautiful.

They come together by the edge of the pool, water glittering blue in the night, and bring their palms together. Jonathan and Nancy flick open their knives, as one, and drag the blades down over their palms. The cut is startlingly cold more than painful, and Nancy shivers, clenches her fist.

"You can still back out," Jonathan tells Steve. "This isn't your fight."

The corner of Steve's mouth twists down. "Don't be stupid, Byers," he says. "You're going to need all the help you can get."

They stare at him.

"Look," he says, throwing up his hands. "I'm with you, okay? For god's sake. We're going down together, and there's no way you're getting rid of me now."

There's a burst of stifled laughter. It comes, to Nancy's amazement, from Jonathan.

"Give me your hand," Jonathan says, and Steve narrows his eyes at him. Only hours ago they were at each other's throats, Nancy remembers. How strange it is now, to watch Steve reach out, and Jonathan take his palm, splay it open upward to the sky, remarkably gentle. Raise his knife and bring it down.

"There," Jonathan says, "now you're really part of this," and it sounds almost like a dare. Steve narrows his eyes. Nancy watches, a thrill in her chest, as Steve rises up to every inch of it.

"Bring it on," Steve says, and their laughter sounds so stupid, so scared in the night. Nancy's eyes burn, but she doesn't blink against the wind. She doesn't want to miss a single second of it.

And then when the monster's got Jonathan pinned to the ground and Nancy's firing all her rounds into it and it still won't *die*—it's Steve who lunges in with the bat and drives it off. "Get the fuck away from here," he yells, swinging the bat wildly, "get *out*," and the monster roars, rears up, steps straight into the trap.

Jonathan's bleeding from his mouth, again. That one's going to take forever to heal, Nancy thinks absurdly, through the sing of adrenaline in her veins, as he lights the flame.

"Burn in hell," Nancy says, and fires a few more shots for good measure.

In the light of the fire in her eyes, it may as well be, shrieking and clawing at them from the trap, rendered just another pathetic animal waiting to be put down. One that'll never hurt again, never take anyone from her again, not ever.

"Damn," says Steve, reverent.

But it's not the fire he's looking at.

It ends like this:

Three teens, panting for breath in the rush of the aftermath, blood shared between their palms. “Is it dead?” Jonathan says. “Did we kill it?” Nancy says. “God, we’re alive,” Steve says, stunned, and he drops the nail-studded bat to the ground. They stand there for a long time, watching the last of the still-flickering embers get eaten up by the air in silence, left only with the wreck of what they’ve done, together.

On the other side, Joyce and Hopper bring a boy back out into this world, and at the same time, Eleven raises her palm, seals herself back in. In the hospital a mother rushes into the room, a child in her arms, another returned to her. “Mike,” she sobs. “My baby. My baby.”

Later, a ring of boys will crowd around Mike Wheeler’s hospital bed, clutch at his hands.

“We made a new friend while you were gone,” Lucas says.

“She was the coolest,” says Dustin. “She made Troy pee his pants! With her *mind!*”

“You would have liked her,” says Will, and Mike stares down at his hand, remembers the faintest phantom touch.

And one day Nancy is late for a not-date and can’t find her lip gloss anywhere. It always manages to get stuck there at the very bottom of her bag, doesn’t it? She runs it over her lips and catches herself in the mirror. The flush to her cheeks is back. She decides she likes it, for the burn. Then the doorbell is ringing, and she flies down the stairs.

“You’d better be on your best behavior,” she tells Mike on her way to the door. In the kitchen her mother is cooking dinner, and her father is stringing up the last of the Christmas lights.

Mike doesn’t even look up from the TV. “I still don’t get why you have to have your stupid gross date at home,” he says.

“It’s not a *date*,” Nancy says.

“Uh-huh,” Mike says, sliding his gaze over to her, unimpressed. “Right.”

“It’s called having friends over for dinner,” Nancy says. And then pauses. They’ve been playing at the pretending game for so long. Maybe it’s enough, by now. “But I suppose you could also, maybe, call it a date. Don’t tell Mom and Dad, though.”

“Eww,” Mike yells after her, “I didn’t *actually* want to know,” and Nancy laughs at his stuck-out tongue, opens the front door. Jonathan and Steve are standing there looking incredibly awkward, but there’s a hint of a smile on their faces, like they’ve just been discussing something funny. There’s only one car in the driveway. It strikes Nancy as hilarious, that Jonathan has to give Steve rides, now that Steve’s dad confiscated his car after what he did to the house. Just tell him you hunted down a monster from another dimension, Jonathan’d said, and Steve had rolled his eyes, muttered *shut up*. Nancy had smiled at them both. It’s okay, she had said, it’ll be our secret.

Like the last of the bruising around Steve’s eye, and the fading cut on Jonathan’s lip. The echoes of laughter between them.

“What?” Nancy says. “What joke did I miss?”

“Nothing,” Steve says. “You look beautiful.”

Nancy looks at them, at their faces, and believes it.

“Hurry up and come on in,” she says, laughing. All around them, it’s started to snow.

And in the bathroom, Mike heaves over the sink, spits out a slimy wriggling slug into the drain. Stares wild-eyed into the mirror and sees the reflection of the woods inside.

